

THE MANAGER**TOP MANAGERS***By Mike Contessa and Eric Bever*

Master the basics, keep detailed records, use a management team to make decisions, improve land with subsurface drainage, adopt technology advance, and accept regulation as a cost of business.

How top dairy producers deal with crop production and environmental regulations

In every industry some companies and individuals are on the top of their game. These are folks who continually seek to master their trade by managing their business to gain efficiencies that ensure financial sustainability. To put it simply, they all do a lot of things right or they wouldn't be at the top. Taking a closer look however, reveals a few things specifically that all of the top producers we work with seem to have in common.

1). Understand the basics:

Top dairy managers work to master the basics first. They understand the importance of managing cropland with the same intensity as they manage their livestock. These types of producers never expect to get great results by chance. Instead they're always looking to identify and repair the weakest link in their crop production chain. Whether they're working to adjust soil pH, tweaking fertility practices or tackling pest management, special attention is paid to the details. Many times we encounter producers who have made significant investments in "new" technologies thinking it will take their operations to the next level. Instead, they quickly realize that they have gotten the cart before the horse, and that the basics are the limiting factor to advance forage quality and yield.

Some of the basics are: adequate soil drainage, appropriate tillage, hybrid selection, balanced soil fertility, pH, weed control, nitrogen management, and proper harvest techniques.

2). Record Everything:

Keeping detailed records is required to meet regulatory compliance (CAFO), however, top producers use this information for their own purposes as well. They rely on this data to make informed crop management decisions. How does one know what they've done wrong or right if they don't have a written history of what was done at all? This concept seems so basic, yet it is commonly overlooked

or perceived as a waste of time. Nothing is further from the truth. This elementary task can help with decisions like hybrid selection, fertility planning and forage inventory management.

3). Use the Team:

Most, if not all, of the top producers we interact with take a management "team" approach to decision making. Management teams are structured differently, but they all involve layers of advisers from every aspect of the dairy that major decisions impact. Keeping everyone in the network aware of the farm's crop production and environmental vision is critical to make it work. It's baffling to think how a producer could get through this web without a great team of employees and advisers who are all working together to help the farm meet or exceed their goals.

4). Land improvement:

Land improvement is always on the top of the to do list. Top dairies employ an aggressive subsurface drainage policy which returns massive short-term gains in feed quality, yields and field accessibility. This not only improves the crop production system, but also helps to get manure applied at the right time and rates.

5). Technology and Change:

Dairy producer leaders are much more involved with technological advances in the industry. The ability to adopt these advances quickly, and use them

Please turn to page 32

FYI

■ **Eric Bever and Mike Contessa** are the President and VP of Champlain Valley Agronomics Inc. Eric Bever, CCA TSP with USDA, is a certified nutrient management planner and Mike Contessa, CCA, is an ag-environmental specialist. Reach them by phone at 518-643-2360 or by email at ebever@aol.com and fieldteck@aol.com.

to their advantage in both crop production and manure management, is paramount to success.

The fear of change can be an issue in any business, and the dairy business is not immune. Most progressive farms seem to have the ability to manage through change and some actually embrace it as it comes. Oddly enough, it seems that the team approach helps to manage through change. Producers who make informed decisions, not knee-jerk reactions that propel them forward with technological advancements, become more efficient and productive.

6). Keeping it legal:

Like in other areas, top producers take a different approach to environmental regulation. That's not to say that they advocate for more restrictive government oversight, it simply means that they

accept it as a cost of doing business. They acknowledge that the industry has to adapt to meet the changing needs and wants of the consumer. They understand and take very seriously the need to become more efficient and productive, while at the same time be the best stewards of the land. They make sure that their entire staff is cognizant of their surroundings and are sensitive to neighbor relation issues. They take a proactive approach to nutrient management and try to address issues before they happen, instead of dealing with them as problems after the fact.

Top managers don't have exclusive access to a silver bullet or a magic bag of tricks. They pay attention to the basic details of crop production and nutrient management. By building on these mastered basics, producers can capitalize on and make the best use of new technology. □